Spontaneous Acts of Scholarly Combustion

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> . . . how can [art] be a reaction to the Other instead of its medium? How must we act when yesterday's transgressions are today's commod- ities? . . . Through the appropriation of data and redistri-bution of value. By leaking and silently exposing the brutalities of institutionalized prac- tices. Not by elevating ourselves and our personal gratification, not by getting too comfortable, but by becoming imperceptible, blending into the artwork itself, by operating in the recesses of established order.
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> ~ Andreas Burckhardt, A Sanctuary of Sounds[1]

For a very long time, and especially in my academic- activist work as it currently manifests itself in the directing of the BABEL Working Group and punctum books,[2] my vision of the university and the public commons it helps to constitute has been inspired by words written in Foucault's Preface and the translator's Introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus (and obviously directly inspired by that work). These are, as it were, the starting premises for what might be called as-yet still unrealized futures for cultural-intellectual life and thought. First, from Foucault's Preface, we have the idea that "the art of living counter to all forms of facism . . . carries with it a certain number of essential principles," such as,

• Develop action, thought, and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction, and not by subdivision and pyramidal hierarchization.

• Withdraw allegiance from the old cate- gories of the Negative (law, limit, castration, lack, lacuna), which Western thought has so long held sacred as a form of power and access to reality. Prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic.

• Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant . . . .[3]

Second, from Mark Seem's Introduction, and quoting Ivan Illich, we are told that, "we must learn to construct tools for conviviality through the use of counterfoil research," and further, that we must work to develop lifestyles and political systems that would "give priority to the protection, the maximum use, and the enjoyment of the one resource that is almost equally distributed among all people: personal energy under personal control."[4]

So what I want to pose today is the hypothesis that the future of academic publishing, as well as its ability to create and sustain publics, rests upon its willingness to take up these principles and directives, especially with regard to the protection, maximum use, and enjoyment of "personal energy under personal control." You hear a lot of discussion about the importance and necessity of academic freedom, especially in the thousands of op-ed pieces that have been written defending tenure as a supposed guarantee of academic freedom, but to my mind, nothing is so lacking in the university and academic publishing today as freedom -- freedom of thought? In the quiet of your office and maybe in your classroom? Sure. But freedom of the practices and modes of expression of that thought? The "principal right," as Derrida once argued, "to say everything, whether it be under the heading of fiction and the experimentation of knowledge, and the right to say it publicly, to publish it"?[5] Hardly. Derrida's university "without condition" is a futural project, one that Derrida claimed could take place tomorrow, and that tomorrow, as far as I am concerned, is now. The future, of necessity, needs to remain always open to the unforeseen -- this is the matter, and the determinative time of justice -- but there is no reason to defer everything. Certain decisions can be made -- every day, in fact -- that can be designed to keep the future productively open, which is also a way to keep the Now creatively messy and unsettled. This will also mean understanding that the other critical term here, in addition to freedom, is responsibility. Someone, or some distributive collectives of someones, which might also form a nomadic para-institution, or "outstitution," needs to take responsibility for securing this freedom for the greatest number of persons possible who want to participate in intellectual-cultural life. A publisher is a person, or a group, or a multiplicity, who is responsible.

Let's distinguish, too, as Paul Boshears has urged, between "publishing" -- "making stuff knowable" -- and "publication" as "public-making," which is a process . . . the process of saturating,"[6] of instantiating and also drenching with writings many publics. Publication would thus be focused on creating tools and platforms and holding areas (some call these books, journals, zines, weblogs, podcasts, etc.), around which certain communities might coalesce, and be sustained. And a "press" would be that which, following the word's Old French etymology, serves as the imprinting device, but also as the pressing "crush" of the crowd into the commons. The university -- and the presses associated with it -- will hopefully continue to serve as one important site for the cultivation of thought and cultural studies more broadly, but increasingly its space is so striated by so many checkpoints, watchtowers, and administrative procedures, that truly radical modes of publishing are difficult to pursue and develop. One has to do only a brief survey of all of the new academic

publishing initiatives cropping up everywhere -- partly due to, on the one hand, a genuine enthusiasm for digital and open-access and post-monograph publishing modes, and on the other hand, the fears and anxieties that coalesce around such new directions, and on yet another (third) hand, the almost anxious hyper-reaction to governmental and university mandates that would dictate open-access publishing as compulsory -- and one will see that, whether we are talking about shorter-form e-book series & e- serials, such as Stanford Briefs, Princeton Shorts, and Palgrave Pivot, or "born-digital" publishing consortiums such as Anvil Academic or Open Library of Humanities, or open-access platforms for more traditional but also experimental forms of the book and the serial, such as Open Humanities Press, that a concern for certain forms of what I will call elite and bureaucratic-managerial academic oversight still exist (with few exceptions).

Whether traditional old-school or forward-leaning progressive in its publishing methods, the academy always seeks its own imprimatur as a sign of so-called legitimacy. And it always talks in the language of austerity (like, "monographs only for tenure!" or more recently, "fuck monographs; it's all just one huge digital mega-journal from now on and everyone can aggregate their own books and cataloguing systems using Mendeley!"). What we need now are illegitimate publishers willing to build shelters for illegitimate publics, which is to say, public- ations, hellbent on pressing a rowdy and unruly crowd of ideas into the ventilating system of this place we call the University-at-large, an Academy of Thought (and also, thought-practices) that is not bound by the specific geographic co-ordinates of specific schools and colleges, but which insists, nevertheless, on playing the shadow- demon-parasite-prod-supplement to the University-proper (its para-mour/more). What we need now is an excess of thought, an excess of modes and forms of public-ation. There are no epistemic boundaries or principles worth guarding; there is no good reason to put a limit to thought within the setting of the Academy of Thought; one must allow in the mad, the chimeric, the deviant, the teratological.

The University remains; it remains as remains. But now may be the time for a subter-fugitive, vagabond, gypsy para-humanities, especially at a time when so many of us are barely hanging on to the university by the skin of our teeth (or hands or minds). punctum books was founded as an exercise and experiment in convivial and not-sad militancy of open thought, in refusing allegiance to the old categories of the Negative, to publication itself as an art of living, of maximizing "personal energies under personal control." We embrace a radical, polyglot cosmopolitanism that enunciates a "shaggy heart,"[7] and like the practitioners of Hakim Bey's amour fou, we strive to be "illegal," "saturating" ourselves with our own aesthetic, engaging in publishing ventures that would fill themselves "to the borders" with "the trajectories of [their] own gestures," running "on angels' clocks," and never tilting at fates fit for "commissars & shopkeepers."[8] One of the things we have lost sight of in the university, and especially in our publishing practices, is the importance of play -- now is the time, again cadging from Hakim Bey, to "share the mischievous destiny" of runaways, "to

meet only as wild children might, locking gazes across a dinner table while adults gibber from behind their masks." [9] Without non-utilitarian play, and without the right to flail, flounder, and fail while playing, we risk the frigid stasis of the status quo, of always being trapped in what has already been said (the literal definition of "fate"), what has already been played out. How did we get here? How did the creative arts get so thoroughly de-cathected from the "liberal" arts? How will we give birth to heretic-misfit love- child thoughts without unbridled play?[10] Publishing, then, and public-ation, as taking more seriously the phrase, field of play.

For me, the most exciting publishing and dissemination ventures going right now are those such as continent., Speculations, Itineration, Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies, D.U.S.T. (the Dublin Unit for Speculative Thought), Uitgeverij ['Publisher'], the Department of Eagles (Tirana, Albania), the Organism for Poetic Research (OPR), the Bruce High Quality Foundation, The Public School New York, the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research, and so on -- journals, presses, and alternative research-educational organizations entirely run and managed by graduate students and post- graduates (and some faculty collaborators) with no external financial support to speak of and only tenuous footholds in the university (our academic precariat), and who are publishing or fostering some of the most exciting work in the humanities and arts right now, work that eschews and also troubles the waters of disciplinary genre, "review," privilege, and status. It is one of the aims of punctum books to assist these and other new (extra- but also para-institutional) initiatives with various forms of regular and longer-term support (economic, editorial, aesthetic, technical, promotional, etc.), but who is paying for this? No one; at least, no one "official." We've simply scraped together what we have; we're running on the steam of an international all-volunteer staff and gift-share economies, also martinis, WD-40, loose change, old Talking Heads albums, matches, a glitter ball, and chewing gum. And yet, we actually believe that an open- access and print-on-demand model (in which all of our publications are both free and available for purchase) may actually lead to something like financial solvency (we'll call that, not profits, but sustainability) and even jobs, but we're not making that a condition of our future plans.

We aim to grow through a vast network of talented persons dedicated to radically independent publishing ventures that would not be beholden to any specific university or commercial academic interest, and to fostering the broadest possible range of open-access print- and e-based platforms for the sustenance of what we are calling a "whimsical para-humanities assemblage" -- an assemblage, moreover, that refuses to relinquish any possible form of public-ation: the making of cultural- intellectual stealth "publics" that would seep in and out of institutional and non-institutional spaces, hopefully blurr- ing the boundaries between "inside" and "outside," an ultimate fog machine. And we are also intent on

resuscitating what we are calling postmedieval and pastmodern forms of publication (from breviary and commentary and florilegium to telegram and liner notes and inter-office memo, from the Book of Hours to the cassette mixtape).

Public-ation, then, as also salvage operation, the re- purposing of discarded objects, discarded forms, discarded genres, as a means for maximizing the possibilities for thinking. Forms matter. The forms of thinking matter. In the plural. Again, it is a commitment to excess, and a refusal of all austerity measures. We're not interested either in the maintenance of specific genres or disciplines (is it literary theory? poetry? philosophy? art history? memoir? sociology? cybernetics? speculative fiction? code? who can tell?), and thus we take seriously Derrida's belief in a university "without condition."

As the authors of the recently-inked "Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics" aver, there may be no possible stemming of the tide of neoliberal capital's narrow- minded "imaginary" and hyper-accelerated technologized infrastructure; therefore, the task now might be, how to hijack and "re-purpose" this infrastructure to different ends and unleash new, more capacious imaginaries?[11] In this scenario, there is room for an aesthetic avant-garde that, in McKenzie Wark's words, will "have to reimagine possible spaces for alter-modernities . . . . Just as the Situationists imagined a space of play in the interstitial spaces of the policing of the city via the dérive, so too we now have to imagine and experiment with emerging gaps and cracks in the gamespace that the commodity economy has become."[12]This is not just a leftist-activist situation with regard to capitalism, it is also an academic situation, with regard to the managerial structure of the University, and it is one for which we are all responsible.

References:

1 Andreas Burckhardt, "Coda II," in Andreas Burckhardt, A Sanctuary of Sounds (Brooklyn: punctum books), n.p.

2 BABEL Working Group: http://www.babelworkinggroup.org; (http://www.babelworkinggroup.org;)punctum books: http://punctumbooks.com. (http://punctumbooks.com/)

3 Michel Foucault, "Preface," in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus: Schizophrenia and Capitalism, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen Lane Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), xv-xvi.

4 Ivan Illich, Tools for Conviviality (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); quoted in Mark Seem, "Introduction," Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus, xxiv.

5 Jacques Derrida, "The Future of the Profession or the University without Condition (thanks to the 'Humanities,' what could take place tomorrow)," in Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader, ed. Tom Cohen (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 26 [24-57].

6 Editors of continent. & Speculations, "Discussion Before an Encounter," continent. 2.2 (2012): 136-147.

7 Julia Kristeva, Strangers to Ourselves, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 140.

8 Hakim Bey, "Amour Fou," in Hakim Bey, T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1991); http://hermetic. (http://hermetic/)com/bey/taz_cont.html.

9 Bey, "Wild Children," in T.A.Z.

10 On the importance of artful play to the humanities as well as to well-being, see L.O. Aranye Fradenburg, "Living Chaucer," Studies in the Age of Chaucer 33 (2011): 41-64, where she writes that, "Playing and pretending are crucial to the becomings of living creatures, to adaptation and behavioral flexibility; . . . it is transformative and transforming. We can neither thrive nor survive without it" (57). See also Aranye Fradenburg, "Frontline: The Liberal Arts of Psychoanalysis," Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry 39.4 (Winter 2011): 589-609.

11 See Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, "#ACCELERATE: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics," May 2013: http:// accelerationism.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/williams-and-srnic ek.pdf. See also McKenzie Wark's response, "#Celerity: A Critique of the Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics," May 2013: http://speculativeheresy.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/wark (http://speculativeheresy.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/wark)-mckenzie-celerity.pdf.

12 Wark, "#Celerity," 2.4. See also, on the possibilities of tactical- poetic interventions into the networks, McKenzie Wark, Telesthesia: Communication, Culture and Class (Cambridge, Eng.: Polity, 2012).